

VP-4 Skinny Dragons Keep Piracy at Bay

Recently, combat aircrew from Maritime Patrol Squadron FOUR (VP-4) were tasked to find a suspected pirate mother ship in the gulf of Oman. Upon commencing a search of the last known position of the suspected pirates, the crew found an unusually weathered fishing vessel matching the description of a possible mothership. The crew descended to investigate and observed several of the crew carrying rifles and witnessed a skiff headed away from the closest merchant vessel, the Jolly Smeraldo, toward the suspected pirate mothership. . “After witnessing that, we decided to warn other vessels in the area of the possible hijacking”, said mission commander Lieutenant Jae Kim. “We then received a mayday call from the Jolly Smeraldo explaining that they had been attacked by the pirates, but had managed to retreat to their safe house on the ship.”

Although piracy in the area has been on the decline in recent months, the number of hostages held by pirate groups has steadily increased. The pirate groups typically board and hijack large merchant vessels and then head for the lawless waters off the coast of Somalia and hold the crews for ransom. In the past, pirates were limited by geography; they were unable to venture far out to sea because they needed to stay close to land for support. Recently, however, pirates have begun to hijack large cargo ships such as the Jolly Smeraldo, using them as the launching point for raids. This practice is particularly disturbing because it dramatically increases the range of pirate groups.

Because the VP-4 crew was able to circle overhead and warn merchant vessels in the area of the observed pirate activity, they were able to eliminate the element of surprise that is critical to the success of a pirate attack. The aircrew was assisted by the Merchant vessel Malibu, who informed UKMTO (UK Maritime Trade Operations) of the situation. The UKMTO in Dubai serves as a point of contact for Merchant ships and liaison to military forces in the area.

After reaching the mothership, the skiff was hauled back aboard only to be re-launched with grappling hooks and ladders in an apparent attempt to insert more pirates aboard the Jolly Smeraldo. However, the high freeboard of the ship and the large wake created by the maneuvering vessel forced the pirates to abandon their attempt. The VP-4 crew was able to assist the Jolly Smeraldo by remaining in the area and updating UKMTO via the M/V Malibu.

Due to the rise in pirate activity, many shipping companies will re-route their traffic through safer waters, thereby increasing their cost to do business which is then passed on to the consumer. With the added fuel costs, insurance, and security measures, estimates of the cost that piracy has on international shipping are in the billions. Working in conjunction with coalition forces, VP-4 is serving a vital role in ensuring that freedom of the seas is maintained today and in the future.